Muslim-Christian Dialogue: Challenges and Prospects

In an address to Muslim community leaders in Cologne, Germany, Pope Benedict XVI has recently emphasized the importance of interreligious dialogue between Muslims and Christians: “Interreligious dialogue and intercultural dialogue between Muslims and Christians,” claims Benedict XVI, “cannot be reduced to an optional extra. It is in fact a vital necessity, on which in large measure our future depends.” The Pope’s call for dialogue offers an alternative to the attitudes of fear and suspicion that all too often mark the interaction between these two religious groups.

Thankfully, Dr. Adil Ozdemir and Dr. Terence Nichols of the University of St. Thomas’s Center for Muslim-Christian Dialogue are attempting to heed the Pope’s call for this dialogue, and are doing so on a local level. Their mission—to foster understanding and cooperation between people of Christian and Muslim faith backgrounds—is therefore one that the Church recognizes as a “vital necessity” for attaining a just and peaceful future.

The Church as a whole has done a lot of positive work with Muslim leaders, such as that being done by the Pontifical Council on Interreligious Dialogue. While affirming the importance of the Church’s international outreach to Muslims, Nichols thinks that more could be done on an Archdiocesan level. That’s where the Center comes in.

Nichols describes the Center’s vision as “a local example of what they’re doing at the Vatican.” Not only is the Vatican concerned about Christian believers and churches in primarily Islamic areas, it is also concerned about helping the two religious groups to live together in peace.

“Most people don’t know that this issue is being pushed by the Vatican,” said Nichols. “It hasn’t quite trickled down to an everyday level.”

After all, as both Nichols and Ozdemir point out, both the Muslim and Christian faiths worship the one God. Using this as their jumping off point, Ozdemir and Nichols hope to penetrate what Nichols calls “the screen of exclusivism.”

“The aim of Judaism, Islam and Christianity is the same,” Nichols added. “The aim of the three religions is to bring people to God. When we call each other wrong—that’s when dialogue closes off.”

Ozdemir takes this one step further. “Indeed, the most fundamental common ground between Islam and Christianity, and the best basis for future dialogue and understanding,” says Ozdemir, “is the love of God and the love of the neighbor.”

Ozdemir, who is a practicing Muslim and co-director of the Center, added that the Qur’an in fact commands Muslims to respect Christians as people of the book: “Do not argue with the people of the scripture (Jews, Christians, and Muslims) except in the nicest possible manner” (Surah 29 46). “We should not argue with
It's a common complaint to hear on college campuses--Facebook has claimed yet another hour that should have been devoted to homework. After a bout of extreme popularity, the social networking site is now being blamed for everything from procrastination to the cheapening of friendship. At the same time, however, Facebook is increasingly called upon by organizations, charities, churches, and causes as a means of reaching the younger generations. According to the Facebook Statistics Page, there are now over 500 million active users. So what is it that makes Facebook worth keeping?

Facebook was created primarily as a place for social networking, and while it has branched out, this is still what it does best. The site provides a way to easily keep in contact with friends and family who are far away. This is great for college students, who spend months at a time away at school. While it is important to call Mom and Dad, Facebook lets people communicate in a different way. It makes it easy to send your sister the really cute video your roommate showed you, or to show your friend out in California pictures of the snowman you made outside your dorm. This is different from phone calls or even email. It is an attempt to replicate the casual joking around that makes hanging out with your friends fun. While it is not the sole feature of friendship, this ability to be lighthearted is nonetheless important, and would otherwise be often lost in long-distance relationships.

Facebook is useful in other ways as well. Many organizations use it as a means to reach large numbers of people about events or causes. We can see its effect clearly here on campus, where everything from Campus Ministry to the Show’d Up Band uses the site to spread the word about their events. Information reaches people on Facebook more easily than even e-mail. If your friend posts something about an event or a cause, it shows up so you can see it, which is unique among posters, e-mails, and other forms of promotion. Facebook has been used to raise awareness about important issues as well, such as the protests surrounding the Iranian election in 2009 or suicide awareness and prevention. For many busy students, Facebook is the first place they hear of these issues.

In order to open up and foster this mutual respect, the Center sponsors a variety of campus and off-campus programming. The Center for Muslim-Christian Dialogue also maintains open lines of communication between local religious groups and presents information on Islam to Catholic parishes in the area. Interested parties are invited to visit the Center’s website at www.stthomas.edu/mcdc.

PHOTO, Page 1: Pope Benedict and Grand Mufti Ceric at the Vatican on November 6, 2008. Ceric is the highest official of religious law for Sunni Muslims in Bosnia-Herzegovina.
Because of the way the site is set up, with an inter-connective network, such sharing is possible.

So too, faith-based and religious groups, find Facebook useful as a tool for evangelization, especially as an effective means of reaching the younger generation. Pope Benedict XVI addresses social networking sites in his message, “New Technologies, New Relationships. Promoting a culture of Respect, Dialogue, and Friendship.” He says that such networks “enable [people] to deepen their common humanity and their sense of shared responsibility for the good of all,” and calls young Christians to use their knowledge of technology to bring the Gospel to the online world.

Thus, while using Facebook responsibly does require the virtue of discipline, its capacity to reach large numbers of people in a new way has the potential to be invaluable in a world that is increasingly digital.

Abby Soffert

**“Heart Speaks to Cyberspace”

The Shortfalls of Facebook**

The first time I tried to delete my Facebook account, there was a flurry of wall posts and messages trying to dissuade me from committing such a blasphemous act against modern communication. Most of these posts were concerned with a single theme: connection. The need to connect to people, the need for community, is endemic to our social well-being. What most people don’t realize, however, is that Facebook does not create such a community. Rather, it drags people into the illusion of community while promoting true isolation.

One of the central parts of community is communication. In fact, without communication society is impossible. I cannot say that Facebook is not a communicative technology. After all, it communicates several things about its subjects: their names, relationships, siblings, favorite things, and etcetera. However, communication over Facebook is a deficient form of communication that neither allows one to keep old friends nor enriches any existing relationship.

It cannot be denied that people change throughout their lives, not just in simple ways, such as their exchanging one favorite song for another; but in complicated ways as well. It is precisely these complicated things that Facebook cannot express. It cannot say how one’s facial expressions or cadence of speech have developed, nor how one’s laugh and sense of humor have changed. Suppose, for a moment, I were to leave my friends and come back to see them three years later knowing only what is relayed over Facebook. I would find that I was meeting very different people. Maybe their interests had not even changed in that time period, but the jokes that used to be funny all of a sudden seem childish to them, and the common philosophy of life we once shared somehow fell into the background. Returning from this event I will realize that I knew absolutely nothing about them.

This is why Facebook cannot truly maintain friendships from afar, because the glue it uses to hold people together cannot withstand the forces pulling them apart. The mystery of friendship is simply too much for cyberspace to handle, and in the end we are left clinging to the last vestiges of a person who no longer exists. By its very nature, then, this friendship is an illusion.

It is also false that Facebook can improve existing relationships. Upon first meeting somebody, one has usually developed a set of simple questions to ask in order to engage the other person in conversation. It is precisely these questions that Facebook answers for you. Therefore, many conversation starters that lead to a deeper knowledge of the person are lost. However, one could argue that Facebook allows one to know what’s on another person’s mind, whether anything interesting has recently happened to them. This argument, unfortunately, fails to account for the fact that someone will normally tell you what’s on his or her mind, as well as any interesting event he or she has recently experienced. On Facebook, however, one will post a new status frequently, regardless of whether this new status communicates anything of worth at all. Hence, the status update on Facebook becomes a kind of mental dump for its users. One may find something interesting occasionally, but it is mostly assorted Twitterian twaddle.

Then again, some people use Facebook for managerial utility, but there is no mass communication Facebook provides that cannot be provided by other venues, such as e-mail.

Perhaps society will some day acknowledge that relationships are about human interaction, heart speaking to heart, and not mere impersonal communication, but even if society is not ready for such a change somebody has to start. As for me, give me true friendship or give me solitude.

David Blumberg
This past summer, I traveled to Chuquibamba, Peru, where I would spend four weeks as a lay missionary in an orphanage with St. Thomas alumna Sheila Kenney. Six religious sisters of the Servants of Our Lord and Virgin of Matará nurtured and provide for 35 children, from just a few weeks old to 18 years. While it certainly seems like an unconventional family on the surface, I was overjoyed to see the children both mothered and fathered. The fathering came from two priests of their larger religious family, the Institute of the Incarnate Word, who celebrated Mass with us and frequently joined us for meals and celebrations. My time spent in Peru made me grateful for the blessings I have here in the U.S., yet it also allowed me to see how the materialistic tendencies of wealthy societies can distract us from the simple and slow-paced lifestyle that is more conducive to deeper faith, and to recognizing our solidarity with our brothers and sisters.

Living in a small Peruvian town in a furnished, but modest orphanage made me truly grateful for all the things that my parents have provided me and for life in the United States in general. The Sisters advised me to shower between 11 am and 5 pm. I learned the reason behind this warning when one early morning I took a shower and was surprised by freezing cold water. In this town, the water is heated by the sun in a big tank above each house, so it is essential to let the water warm up after getting cold through the night. This sacrifice, although small, certainly made me frustrated, yet grateful for the wealth I enjoy in the U.S.

I also chose to give up my vegetarian diet while in Peru, as I realized that being so selective in the type of food I eat was neither realistic, given the impoverished condition of my hosts, nor gracious, since those who prepared the food were giving me all that they had. In the materialistic culture of the U.S. we often fail to see the luxurious conditions behind our daily choices, and we consequently have a mindset of entitlement. I was challenged during my time in Chuquibamba to put aside what I thought I was entitled to and rather be grateful for each little gift I was given.

Materialism, needless to say, is not a problem for the children living in the orphanage. While each child has his or her own bed, clothes, and backpack, the children share toys and books in common, and frankly, I discovered few toys are needed to inspire hours of uninhibited play. One afternoon, I taught the older boys how to play baseball while the preschoolers used an old rope to form a train, an activity that would entertain them for hours. Ah the simple pleasures!

The older girls had very maternal instincts and never missed a chance to attend to the twin baby girls. I saw with my eyes the love the children had for their “brothers and sisters.” Having a gracious heart came so easily to these children, who had been taught by the Sisters to rely fully on God. The Sisters modeled this as they would sneak away to the chapel for a little time between teaching a child to read and doing the pounds of laundry that 35 kids produce on a daily basis. These amazing women did not pretend to be self-reliant, and I began to realize that neither should I. Likewise, the children knew they should depend on God and one another.

I could not forget that many of these children had faced terrible evil, including disturbed family life, malnutrition, and extreme poverty. Their faith was nonetheless profound and mature and like our late Holy Father John Paul II, these children had been given over to the maternal care of Our Lady at a young age. For the first time in my life, I witnessed children who have a faith that gives me a reason to hope for the world, even amid the uncertainties of my own life.

Now back in the States, I can say that my time in Peru has taught me to order my life in a way less focused on me and more on others, in Christ. To be honest, it was a painful decision to give up half of my summer to a cause I did not initially feel invested in. Yet, the Lord patiently instructed me, and in Peru, I was given the grace to receive a living love from the children and Sisters. If you would like more information on the opportunity of a lifetime, a chance to die to yourself and let Christ live in you, I urge you to apply to be a lay missionary. Visit www.ssvmus.org (for women) or www.ive.org (for men).

Elizabeth A. Jamison